

Suit Up

Duff Watkins and Jean Woo

In Sydney recently we met Cruz Bustamante the Lt. Governor of California. (He's the guy pictured above who is not Arnold Schwarzenegger.)

Cruz is the anti-Arnie. He's short, stout and stocky. In fact, he's spheroid. Usually, putting a suit on a guy with his physique is like draping a post box in wool.

But this round, little dude *knows* how to wear a suit! His threads were tailored, well cut, and elegant. He looks like a guy in charge of the 6th largest economy in the world (which he is) and probably the next Governor of California (which he may be).

Friends, that's the power of a suit. No wonder sales of men's tailored clothing have increased 23.7% last year in the US to \$4.3 billion, with suit sales alone jumping 34%. That halts an eight-year decline. Smart casual may be cool but in business, as in sports, you can't play unless you suit up.

The suit is the international uniform of the business world. Wear one and you're in the game; you're a player. The historical advantage the suit bestowed when it first appeared was that it let 19th man escape the limited identity of his tribe, class, and nationality. It united all wearers into a single anonymous, international, and commercially interacting urban class—modern man.

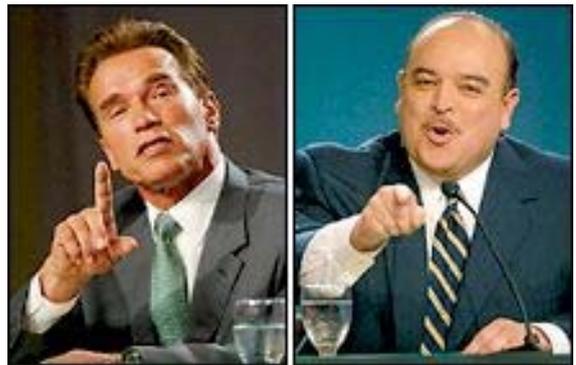
In today's business world you need to project vitality and competence. When your suit looks smart, urban and organized, you gain an edge. Only the suit states that you're an upwardly mobile male, on the move, going places. That's because the suit originate in motion.

Despite its formal appearance the suit has a sporting background. The pockets, sleeves, legs and lapels stem from activity. That vent in the back of the jacket was cut to drape over a saddle. Those notched lapels close the front sleekly like a cavalryman's breastplate. Trousers originated for horseback riding. The flying skirts of Alexander the Great's hard charging cavalry could cause saddle sores, not to mention embarrassment, for the riders. Both are bad when you're out to conquer the world. Then, as now, image matters.

These days, our conquests are more administrative than heroic. So the suit simply dismounted and started issuing orders from behind a desk. That's how the suit has lasted one century and looks good for another: it adapts to the times.

Ultimately, the suit is about belonging. Males dress to look acceptable not fabulous (unlike women).

The suit doesn't limit you, it liberates you. It frees you to interact with all kinds of people and, more importantly, expedites their acceptance of you. The suit rapidly telegraphs the key message, "I belong."



Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and Lt. Gov. Cruz Bustamante

Perhaps that's why Cruz Bustamante topped off his suit by sporting an elegant gold tie with an aboriginal kangaroo motif. Even when you run the world's 6th largest economy it pays to blend in.

Cruz knows; never underestimate the power of a good suit.

How to Wear a Suit

Clothes that fit correctly look like an extension of you, not an afterthought. Some general tips:

- **Achtung!:** Pay more attention to the fit and proportion of your suit than whether your shirt and tie match.
- **Smoothness rules:** Horizontal creases and stress lines mean only one thing - the garment is too tight. Fabric always sits smoothly on well fitting clothes.
- **Fastenings should be fast.** Buttons correspond with specific holes for a specific reason, namely, they belong together. Zippers are meant to move without protest and remain invisible.
- **Waist high:** Expanding girths may push your belt line south but leave the hipster look to young girls and invest some money in getting your pants fitted properly. Waistbands sit on waists, not below.
- **2 finger test:** Your pants are the correct size if you can easily insert two fingers at the waist.
- **Display not Splay:** Pleats, pockets, flaps and zips should lie flat when you stand. If they splay open, the garment is too tight. If your zipper splays open and is visible, the garment is too tight. If you don't know the meaning of "splay", the garment is too tight.
- **Give your pants a break:** Trousers hems *break* over the shoe. *Break* means the fabric at the front of the trouser leg drapes slightly on top of your shoe. The back of the trouser leg should just touch the heel of your shoe. Above all, avoid having your pants too short. Unless, of course, it's high tide and you're going clamming.
- **Eaves back:** Shoulders on your suit jacket should be extend just slightly beyond your natural shoulder line rather than stick out like eaves on a Federation house. Tightness around the shoulders and armholes creates an 'uptight' appearance. Smart tailoring fixes this.
- **Suit up, don't show up:** This rule is non-negotiable. Dress well but don't show up your boss or a client by implicitly belittling their sense of fashion. Remember, it's all about belonging. Our golden rule: suit yourself, but not at the expense of others.

Authors

Dr Duff Watkins

is Director, Asia/Pacific of the Cornerstone International Group, consultants to Boards and Management. He has been interviewed by Geraldine Doogue, Bert Newton, Neil Mitchell and others. His doctorate is in psychotherapy and he writes regularly on the psychological impact of dress.



Jean Woo

is an expert on 'people packaging' and has been an image consultant for over 10 years. Once a commercial lawyer, she is now Director of Personal Brand Management and advises men, women and companies on all aspects of personal branding. She wrote *Executive Style* (Prentice Hall 1997).

They are co-authors of *Dress For Effect* (due 2006).